

SCOTTISH THEMES IN CLASSICAL MUSIC

By Ken McNaughton

*Two giants of the Romantic Classical Period
composed music inspired by Scottish themes.*

Max Bruch (1834-1920) was a German Romantic composer whose Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor Op. 26 (1866) is one of the most popular Romantic violin concertos. During a visit to the Munich Library in 1862, Bruch found some Scottish melodies in a copy of the Scots Musical Museum by James Johnson [1]. He said the Scots tunes “pulled me into their magical circle” and that they were more beautiful and original than folk tunes from Germany. During the Berlin winter of 1879-1880, he composed most of the Scottish Fantasy, more fully known as the Fantasia for the Violin and Orchestra with Harp, freely using Scottish Folk Melodies, Op. 46. Unlike a normal fantasy, the Scottish Fantasy consists of four full-fledged movements. The role of the harp, an instrument associated with Scotland’s earliest traditional music, is nearly as prominent as that of the violin soloist.



Figure 1. Max Christian Bruch.

Each of the Scottish Fantasy’s four movements is based on a different Scottish folk tune. The piece begins in darkness, evoking the image of “an old bard who contemplates a ruined castle and laments the glorious times of old.” We then are introduced to the 18th century tune “Through the Wood Laddie.” The second movement is based on “The Dusty Miller,” a lively, cheerful tune that first appeared in the early 1700s. “Through the Wood Laddie” is revisited in the transition to the third movement, whose main theme is derived from the 19th century song, “I’m A’ Doun for Lack O’ Johnnie.” The fourth movement includes a sprightly arrangement of the tune in the unofficial Scottish national anthem, “Scots Wha Hae.” The lyrics were written by Robert Burns in 1793, in the form of a speech given by Robert the Bruce before the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, where Scotland maintained its sovereignty from the Kingdom of England. Burns wrote the lyrics to the traditional Scottish tune “Hey Tuttie Tatie,” which according to tradition was played by Bruce’s army at the battle. This ancient war song and “stomping dance” has taken on many different titles and sets of lyrics over the years. Bruch alternates virtuosic variations on the main theme interspersed with a contrasting lyrical melody. After one last appearance of a phrase from “Through the Wood Laddie,” the Scottish Fantasy concludes triumphantly. There is an excellent video of the Scottish Fantasy performed in Galicia with the British conductor Rumon Gamba and American violinist Stefan Jackiw [2].

Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847), widely known as Felix Mendelssohn, was a German composer, pianist, organist and conductor of the early Romantic period. He first visited Britain in 1829 and visited Edinburgh that summer. Scotland inspired two of his most



famous works—the concert overture, *The Hebrides* (also known as *Fingal’s Cave*), and the *Scottish Symphony* (*Symphony No. 3*). *The Hebrides* was composed in 1830, revised in 1832, and published the next year as his Op. 26. It was inspired by his trip in 1829 to the Scottish island of Staffa, with its basalt sea cave known as *Fingal’s Cave*. Staffa is an island of the Inner Hebrides in Argyll and Bute. The island came to prominence in the late 18th century after a visit by Sir Joseph Banks. He and his fellow-travelers extolled the natural beauty of the basalt columns in general and of the island’s main sea cavern, which Banks renamed ‘*Fingal’s Cave*’.

Figure 2. Felix Mendelssohn, 1834.

The Giant’s Causeway is an area of about 40,000 interlocking basalt columns, the result of an ancient volcanic fissure eruption. It is located in County Antrim on the north coast of Northern Ireland, about three miles (4.8 km) northeast of Bushmills, where the Macnaghten Clan Chiefs lived from 1818 until the end of 2014. The tops of the columns form stepping stones that lead from the cliff foot and disappear under the sea. Most of the columns are hexagonal, although there are also some with four, five, seven or eight sides. According to legend, the columns are the remains of a causeway built by a giant. The Irish giant Fionn mac Cumhaill (Finn MacCool), was challenged to a fight by the Scottish giant Benandonner. Fionn accepted the challenge and built the causeway across the North Channel so the two giants could meet. Across the sea, there are identical basalt columns (a part of the same ancient lava flow) at *Fingal’s Cave* and it is possible the story was influenced by this. *Fingal’s Cave* is 85 miles (137km) north of the Giant’s Causeway and 35 miles (56km) west of Dunderave, the traditional home of the Macnachtan Chiefs in Scotland. To experience a visit to *Fingal’s Cave*, I recommend watching this video [3]. Listen to the music with a good video, such as this one [4].



Figure 3. The Giant’s Causeway, Northern Ireland.

REFERENCES

1. “[Scottish Fantasy](#),” The Broadway Bach Ensemble Ltd., 2019.
2. “[Scottish Fantasy](#),” Orquesta Sinfónica de Galicia, Palacio de la Ópera de A Coruña, 24 October 2014 (33 minutes 12 seconds).
3. [Fingal’s Cave Isle of Staffa](#), wyrdwebwonders, 20 October 2009 (2 minutes 59 seconds).
4. [Mendelssohn Overture The Hebrides](#), London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Sir John Eliot Gardiner, 8 February 2017 (9 minutes 58 seconds).
5. Wikipedia was used extensively to provide context.

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